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ABSTRACT

The steps involved in conducting a valid needs assessment are described and some problems to be avoided are discussed. Needs assessment begins with a set of educational goals. It is important that community opinion be obtained regarding the goals to ensure that they represent the interests of all involved in the educational process. Once the goals are established data can be gathered related to goal attainment in order to uncover discrepancies between desired conditions and the actual state of affairs. Two kinds of data should be used: "hard" data which includes measures such as test results, absentee rates, etc. and "soft" data which shows perceptions of people about the goals. The survey instrument should be designed to measure how important the goal is and the extent to which it is being achieved. Reconciling the differences between the respondent groups as to where the greatest needs lie is usually followed by establishing priorities, the first step in a total program-development cycle. Performance objectives are then developed for each identified need, providing a basis for planning new programs. After programs are implemented and evaluated, a reassessment of the original needs can take place to see how much progress is being made and whether new priorities are needed. This is the cycle of program development and evaluation that the original needs assessment sets into motion. (RC)

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# CONDUCTING LOCAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT: A GUIDE

James M. Morgan

## The Current Status of Needs Assessment

Assessment of educational needs is currently taking place on many levels for a variety of purposes. For example, the National Assessment of Educational Progress provides a form of needs assessment on a nationwide level. Many states now have statewide testing and assessment programs to help set state priorities in education (4). Needs assessment is assuming greater importance at the local school-district level as well. Some of the impetus for local needs assessment has been provided by state programs that require local needs assessment as a component of statewide assessment efforts. In addition, special state and federal funding programs are increasingly requiring that project proposals be based on a systematic assessment of local needs. Perhaps the most compelling reason for local needs assessment is increased community involvement in local education, which is leading to a call for wider participation in the determination of local educational needs and priorities.

While the reasons for local needs assessment are becoming apparent, many school administrators are not sure what is involved in doing a valid needs assessment at the local level. For the preparation of this guide, a number of sources have been reviewed. This paper describes the steps involved in conducting a valid needs assessment and identifies some problems to be avoided. It is intended to be a practical but nontechnical guide. However, suggestions are given for further assistance on technical points.

## Beginning with Goals

For the needs assessment process described here, an educational need is defined as the discrepancy between desired educational goals for students and the actual performance of students in the schools. Needs are defined according to the difference between what students are actually learning and the desired results of their school experience. Thus, needs are always stated in terms of the students, not of teachers or administrators. It should also be emphasized that needs are *not* expressed as program resources such as teacher aids or supplementary textbooks. These resources are actually the remedies that help meet the needs. For example, the stated need might be for improved reading achievement - not for more reading specialists.

Needs assessment begins, then, with a set of educational goals. In some cases, the local board of Education may have already made an explicit statement of its educational goals for the school system. These goals might include any student-centered priorities in areas that the board believes are important, such as basic skills development, improved discipline, or career education. If the board of Education has not made a statement of educational goals, or if the goals were



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stated some time ago, it will be necessary to develop or update them. On the other hand, the priorities of the board may be implicit in recent policy and budgetary decisions and may need only to be made explicit.

In deciding what goals to endorse, the local board and school-system staff may want more information about possible goal areas. The most useful source to consider may be the educational priorities developed by the state department of education through its own assessment program. In Ohio, for example, a list of eight educational goals was developed through the statewide Search for Consensus, which involved citizens from all walks of life and from all parts of the state (15). The Ohio educational goals are typical of those developed in other states and include such areas as language skills, math and science, career education, human relations, and physical and mental health. If the state has established statewide educational priorities, they should be considered in selecting local goals since state goals usually determine state funding priorities.

Another source from which to obtain input during goal selection is the goal statements of other districts, which can usually be obtained upon request. Educational books and journals, particularly those for administrators or boards of education, list sample goals from time to time. A recent issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* listed eighteen educational goals that are very comprehensive (16).

Each of the goals should be distinct from the others and state in clear and simple words the general educational priorities toward which the school system will direct its efforts - not the specific objectives it hopes to accomplish (8). Whatever process is used, it is important that community opinion be obtained regarding the goals to ensure that they represent the interests and concerns of all involved in the educational process - teachers, parents, administrators, and, of course, students (11). The goals should then receive official endorsement from the board of education.

## Gathering Data on Goal Attainment

Goal setting itself is not a simple task, and it may require some time to formulate a comprehensive list of goals on which all interested parties can agree. However, once a set of goals is established, the real work of needs assessment can begin. The next phase involves gathering data related to goal attainment in order to uncover the discrepancies between the desired conditions represented by the goals and the actual state of affairs in the school system.

There are two kinds of data that should be used in needs assessment: "soft" data, which shows perceptions of people about the educational goals; and "hard" data, which includes measures such as test results, absentee rates, discipline information, per-pupil expenditures, and so forth. Both kinds of data are useful in identifying the needs of the school system.

Soft data on the views and opinions of the schools' constituents is gathered most easily through the administration of a survey. Although much effort is required to construct and administer a survey that will produce valid results, the various groups of people involved in the needs assessment process usually accept the results since they represent their collective opinions regarding the attainment of the school system's goals (6). Therefore, the first task in organizing the survey effort is to decide which groups will be represented and how they will be represented. More than likely, at least four groups will be surveyed: parents, teachers, students, and administrators. These groups might be subdivided since the viewpoints of the parents of elementary- and secondary-level students will probably differ with regard to some of the goals. Opinions of elementary- and secondary-level teachers and students are also likely to differ (2). Similarly, the perceptions of field and central administrators may also differ significantly on some goals.

Subdividing the various groups in this way will undoubtedly provide interesting results in terms of differences of opinion. A problem may arise, however, in interpreting the results and reconciling the differences so that an overall judgment can be made regarding the attainment of the school system's goals. Another complication may arise because each subgroup surveyed must be randomly sampled, and a separate random sample for each subdivision must be drawn and results obtained from its members. This may not be too great a problem with groups such as teachers, students, and administrators, but reaching a specified number of parents or other community residents is usually difficult. Perhaps the best procedure is to select the subgroups whose results

will be most meaningful and most readily obtained (5).

The survey instrument can be designed in a relatively simple format to provide two types of information useful in assessing needs. For each goal, the survey respondents should be asked to indicate both how important they believe the goal is and the extent to which they think it is being achieved. This information can be gathered by listing the goal statements on the survey form and then providing two scales of five points each on which to rate the goals. On the first scale, the respondents rate the goal from "Not Important At All" to "Very Important" with scale values increasing from 1 to 5 according to the importance of the goal. On the second scale, the respondents rate the degree of present achievement of the goal from "Very Low" to "Very High Achievement". Again, scale values should increase from 1 to 5 according to the degree of achievement.

As mentioned previously, the selection of the members of the various subgroups to be surveyed should be done by a random selection procedure. Technical books on survey procedures such as (21) and (1) provide tables on the size samples must be to provide results with a given degree of certainty. These books also provide information on the random selection procedure itself, which usually involves the use of a table of random numbers. Persons with expertise in random selection should assist with these procedures, to ensure that the obtained results are from correctly drawn samples.

There are some points to remember when the actual needs assessment survey is sent out to the selected respondents. A cover letter explaining the reason for the survey should be written for each group of respondents - parents, teachers, and so forth. The letter should emphasize the importance of returning the survey since it is a part of a selected sample. It helps to have the survey endorsed by the head of an organization representing the group surveyed (for example, the PTA president or teacher organization president). Before they are sent out the forms themselves should be coded in some way to identify the particular group being surveyed; however, individual respondents do not have to identify themselves. To ensure an adequate return rate, it may be necessary to send out a follow-up copy of the survey, especially to parents and community residents. While one can expect to get nearly all of the survey forms back from students, teachers, and administrators, a return rate of fifty to seventy percent would be very good from parents and community residents, even with the follow-up mailing. If a very low response is obtained from a particular group, it may help to do follow-up person-to-person or telephone interviews to verify the results obtained from the survey.

## Uncovering Discrepancies

When as many forms as possible have been received, tabulation of the results can begin. In large school districts, it may be best to plan a computerized analysis of the data; tabulation can be done by hand, but the process is time consuming. Primarily, the analysis involves obtaining the mean response rating on the two five-point scales for each goal and for each group surveyed. Thus, for any goal, two values would be obtained for each group. The first value would be the group's mean rating on the Importance scale; the second would be the mean rating on the Achievement scale. Comparison of the various group's mean importance ratings will show how parents, students, teachers, and administrators differ in the importance they attach to each goal. Likewise, comparison of the mean achievement ratings will show how well the groups believe the goals are being met regardless of their rated importance.

Determination of the actual discrepancy between importance and achievement is simply a matter of subtracting the mean achievement rating from the mean importance rating given each goal by each of the respondent groups. The larger the discrepancy value - that is, the greater the difference between the importance rating and the achievement rating - the greater will be a given need as seen by the respondent group. For example, parents as a group may rate a goal of basic skills improvement high in importance but feel their children are not achieving that goal satisfactorily. The difference between the parents' importance rating and achievement rating would be greater than the differences obtained for other goals. Teachers, on the other hand, may also rate basic skills high in importance but feel that their students are achieving the skills satisfactorily. Their discrepancy value, therefore, would be less. Comparison of the size of the discrepancy values *within* the respondent groups will show each group's

view of the most pressing educational needs of the school system in relation to the system's selected educational goals.

The real test of the needs assessment process comes in reconciling the differences *between* the respondent groups as to where the greatest needs lie. In some cases, all groups may show high discrepancy values for one or more goals, and it can be assumed that students, parents, teachers, and administrators all see a great need for more effort toward these goals. For other goals, discrepancy values may be uniformly low across groups, which would indicate that the respondents feel these goals are being adequately reached and that no pressing need exists. (In a few cases, one might obtain a negative discrepancy value, which indicates a low rating on importance but a high rating for achievement.) The problem comes when one or more groups give a high discrepancy value to a goal and the other groups give a low discrepancy value. In the example given previously, parents saw a strong need for more emphasis on basic skills improvement while teachers were satisfied with their students' progress. Reconciling these kinds of differences in order to arrive at a final consensus on the needs of the school system is the process at the heart of needs assessment.

## Reconciling Differences

One approach to reconciling differences in perceived need between groups is to convene a panel of representatives from the surveyed groups to review the survey results and, in particular, the discrepancy data to see if the panel can come to an agreement on the extent of need (19). For example, representatives from the teachers' organization, the PTA Council, and student and administrator groups might meet with a staff person who can explain the results of the survey and facilitate discussion among the panel members to reach consensus on the results.

The second approach to reconciling perceived differences in needs is to obtain and study the second type of data mentioned previously - hard data, which provides objective information such as achievement test scores or attendance rates (9). It may be found, for example, that students in the school district are achieving at or very near national norms on standardized achievement tests. This would help confirm the perception of teachers in our example that students are achieving satisfactorily. On the other hand, it may be found that students in certain schools are scoring considerably below the national norm, and it may have been the parents of these students who made sure they returned their survey forms. Their high return rate would account for the data showing parent dissatisfaction with basic skills achievement. Analyzing the hard data in this manner helps pinpoint the need more precisely and tends to confirm the perceptions of one group or another.

As may be evident, the data collected for needs assessment, whether soft or hard, does not in itself automatically identify the needs of the school system. It is simply more information for the board and representative panel to use in arriving at a consensus about needs. Actually, the final statement of needs for the school system will represent the results of a political as well as a technical process. This is why it is important for all groups to be represented throughout the needs assessment process from goal setting, through surveying, to final designation of the needs. This needs assessment process provides a structure within which meaningful community involvement in the schools can take place.

## Setting Priorities

Although the reconciliation process just described will provide a set of identified needs, priorities will not have been determined. The reconciliation procedure alone may be sufficient if the school system has adequate resources to meet each need. The more likely situation, however, is that priorities will have to be established. (7). Unfortunately, there are no data available or formulas to follow for establishing the priorities. There are some criteria that the board and representative panel should consider, however. The first is the importance rating of the original goal. If most groups agree that the goal is highly important, even if the discrepancy value is not as large as others, this information should be considered in ranking the need. The second factor would be the size of the discrepancy. Two goals of nearly equal importance may have very different discrepancy values, which would provide a basis for choosing between them.

There are other factors to consider in ranking the needs. Is the resolution of the problem seen as a

short-range or long-range undertaking? It may be better to solve some short-range problems first to show achievement in some areas rather than commit a lot of resources to a long-range problem with an uncertain solution. Along with the question of time goes the question of availability of resources. The choice between two equally urgent needs may be made in favor of the one that requires lower projected expenditures to meet the need. The above guidelines may be helpful for ranking the needs; however, since establishing priorities is highly subjective, the active participation of all interested groups throughout the needs assessment process will help ensure committment to the final priority order (10).

## Using Needs Assessment for Program Development

While the formal process of needs assessment ends with the establishment of a list of prioritized needs, this phase should be seen as only the first step in a total program-development cycle. Needless to say, there would be nothing more frustrating or alienating for people in the school-system community than to participate in a needs assessment program only to see the identified needs ignored. Thus, the board of education must be willing to commit itself to a follow-up program. This program can begin with the development of performance objectives for each identified need. More than one objective may have to be stated for each need. The performance criteria of the objective set the standards for judging whether the need is actually being met (20).

These performance objectives also provide the basis for planning new programs to meet the needs. For example, developing objectives based on a need for improved reading achievement should help in the selection of materials and resources to build a new or revised reading program. After programs are implemented and evaluated, a reassessment of the original needs can take place to see how much progress is being made and whether new priorities are needed. This is the cycle of program development and evaluation that the original needs assessment sets into motion.

## Resources for the Assessment Program

What kinds of resources are needed to successfully complete a needs assessment of the kind described here? The technical aspects may be handled by the local system's department of research and evaluation if it has staff with the necessary expertise. In some of the states now requiring local needs assessment, technical assistance may be available from the state department of education (13). Local colleges, universities, or research institutes may have people who could provide help on a contractual basis.

Perhaps more important than the technical expertise is the coordination of the needs assessment process by someone skilled in community relations. While this person should understand the technical aspects of needs assessment well enough to explain them to noneducators, his or her primary skills should lie in the ability to involve disparate groups (parents, teachers, and so forth) in the needs assessment process and in the ability to encourage them to work together.

The needs assessment procedure described here is a somewhat simplified approach using ideas from a number of sources. Published needs-assessment programs are available with detailed instructions, materials, and, usually, a predetermined list of goals with which to begin the process. Two of the best published programs are the one developed by the Center for the Study of Evaluation (3) and the one sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa (14). With certain modifications and additions, these programs follow a series of steps similar to those described in this paper.

The author has also produced a set of training materials for local school needs assessment and goal setting for individual schools. This program begins with the identification of perceived needs and problems by teachers, parents, students, and residents of the community. These problems are validated by surveying the entire school community and by analyzing hard data on the problems. Validated problems are then translated into goals for the school to pursue. Goals identified in each school can then be collected on a system-wide basis. The training program provides materials for two groups: local school facilitators of the goal-setting process such as principals, and educational evaluators who

can assist in the required gathering and interpretation of data.

## Greater Emphasis on Human Relations

In many discussions, needs assessment has been presented primarily as a technical process. The emphasis in this paper however, has been that the human-relations aspects of needs assessment are at least as important as the technical concerns. Adequate attention must be given to both aspects of the assessment to ensure a meaningful and valid appraisal of educational needs.

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